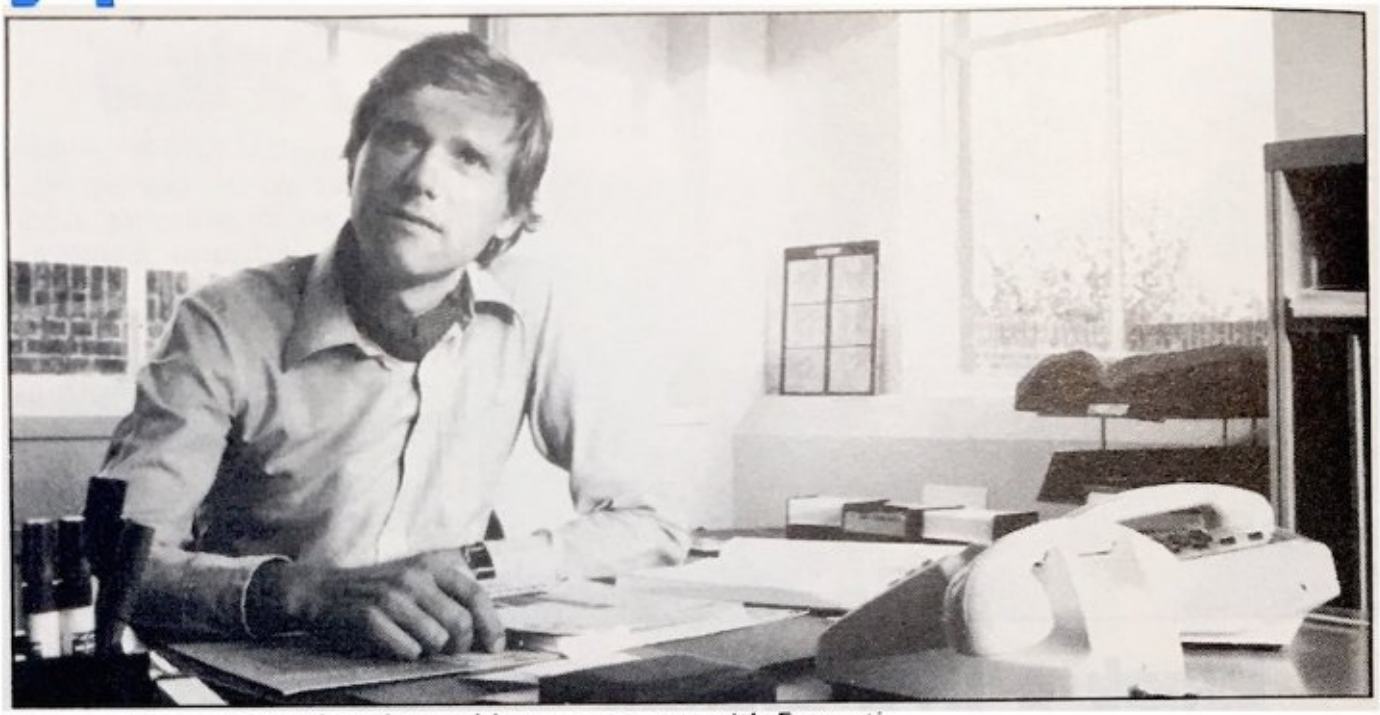
Delivery problems with BBC micro

Maybe the BBC micro from Acorn was doomed to problems from the start.

It seems to be the way of things that too much media hype can be worse for a product than none at all. Either it never manages to live up to expectations that eventually pass all normal tests of credibility, or the demand for it surpasses all estimates and wild guesses. Then again other things can go wrong.

One of the major factors in the difficulties faced by Acorn over the BBC micro is that the media hype, and the ensuing public wrangling that has followed the company's selection, has itself become a media event. The slightest problem with the development or production of the machine was news, and there has been some of that.

Now at last, according to both directors Chris Curry and Herman Hauser, the problems have been solved,



Herman Hauser says that the problem was never with Ferranti

mand would be high, director Chris Curry admits that the company guessed wrong on the split between the two types of BBC machine — the type A and type B.

'We expected people to go for the cheaper type A,' said Curry, 'so production

further two, as yet unnamed sub-contractors could also be appointed in the UK.

According to Chris Curry, production is now running at a level of some 1600 machines a week. For the impatient, another route to getting a popular type B machine early has been

A brand new processor is an interesting gamble when other manufacturers have already followed different routes, but Hauser is convinced that the decision will be vindicated, as it offers several advantages over existing 16-bit parts. 'Firstly, it is in a 48-pin package, not a

though the effects of those problems will continue to be felt for some time yet.

There have been two main areas where things have not gone right for Acorn and the BBC machine. The first was the much publicised trouble with the Ferranti Uncommited Logic Array circuit. According to Herman Hauser, that problem has now been fully sorted and the company is moving ahead towards its next design using this technology.

'The problem was never with Ferranti,' Hauser said, 'rather it was that we were milking the technology for all it was worth — running the circuit at 16MHz and with nearly 100 per cent of its cells in use. There were areas of the circuit that exceeded its specification.

'Now we are getting the new design ready. This will be the Tube circuit, the interconnecting bus controller between the 6502 and the second processor.'

The second, and more long term problem was the readily admitted miscalculation of the market response. While it was one thing to guess that the overall demand was organised on that basis. We estimated a three to one ratio of 'A's to 'B's, and that is how the production started. In practice it was the other way round. Orders for the type B were three times those for the type A.'

Despite this, the type A was still not produced in sufficient quantities to fully satisfy demand, and deliver-

Delay of 10 weeks for the B micro

ies are still running a tolerable 21 days after order. For the type B however, the picture is not so rosy. Though the production ratio now matches the order pattern, Acorn is still running with about 10 weeks delivery schedules. Curry expects it to be August before the company catches up on the type B to the point where a 21 day delivery can be offered. And even this may appear optimistic.

One factor helping this is the addition of another, Hong Kong based sub-contractor to produce the machines. Though primarily for the Far East market, the early production from Hong Kong will come to the UK to help redress the balance. A

opened up, for Acorn dealers can now sell the upgrade kit for the type A. It costs £100, which is the same price difference between the two versions.

The dealers are also being equipped with test jigs for both the upgrade work, and repair of the BBC micro.

The forthcoming Tube circuit is designed to allow the easy use of a second processor with the machine, and one of the options for this role is going to be a 16-bit add-on box, which should be available by the fourth quarter of this year. With the move into 16-bit processing, Acorn will be breaking with the albeit young tradition of choosing either the Intel 8086/8088 or the Motorola 68000 as the basis of the machine.

Instead, according to Herman Hauser, development work is now well advanced on a machine using the as yet untried National Semiconductor 16032 processor. This part is very new, and Hauser claims that Acorn has had the first samples to come to Europe.

64-pin one, he said, then the memory management unit (MMU) runs 50 per cent faster than on the other processors. It is also a better MMU, as it allows segmentation in 512-byte chunks.

The instruction set is, he feels, amongst the most elegant ever devised, and Acorn will have a Pascal compiler running in machine code directly on the processor, rather than using a P-code version. The way in which position independent code has been designed into the processor should also allow the development and use of compilers held in ROM.

He gave as an example of what the new processor can produce — a floating point maths program the company has written both for the BBC machine and the new processor. 'On the 16032, it ran 11 times faster and required 35 per cent less code to write,' he said.

However interesting all of this might be for the future this still will not placate all the people (and there are a lot judging by your letters) who are still waiting for a BBC machine. ■